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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Activists in Samarkand Making a Difference

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On September 8, Poloff met with ten human rights activists from "Ezgulik," the only registered human rights organization in Uzbekistan. They discussed their observations of trends in the areas of child labor and religious freedom, but most of them focus their attention on the problems of everyday people - an approach that may well be the best way forward for the struggling NGO community. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) All of the participants in the meeting have "day jobs," outside professions for which they receive a salary, but on the side they assist people in filing petitions or otherwise addressing problems with local and regional governments. They receive little to no money for their efforts, but get great personal satisfaction in bringing about small changes. Participants described successes in things like restoring the gas supply to a local mosque and securing electrical improvements for a school that was having to use candle light. Their work on these issues brings concrete results, while not drawing excessive government attention.

¶3. (SBU) The issue of child labor evoked a wide range of comments, and it seems that as is the case within the official Government of Uzbekistan, there is much disagreement amongst activists over the nature of the problem. One activist asserted that if teachers did not involve kids in the cotton harvest, parents would do so on their own volition, as they need the money to cover the school costs for the children. Others insisted that reforms needed to be made to protect the children involved, noting that every year children die in accidents related to the cotton harvest. (Last year five students were apparently struck by a train when they were left unsupervised in an unfamiliar area.) One activist suggested that the government should require that the children receive a minimum number of calories every day that they work the fields, to ensure that their health doesn't suffer. All agreed that the child labor problem is intimately related to greater problems of agricultural reform.

¶4. (SBU) Other activists voiced their concerns over religious freedom in the Samarkand district. Two teachers in the meeting specifically brought up the headscarf issue, stating that school uniform policies generally do not allow headscarves, and that students trying to wear them are often ridiculed or humiliated by other kids and teachers alike, and have even been expelled on occasion. The teachers didn't blame the government for these problems, but rather the mentality of many people in the population, and they stated that the schools need to encourage more

tolerance and understanding in this area.

Comment

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15. (SBU) The larger lesson that came out of this meeting is more about the role of NGOs in Uzbekistan, rather than any one particular issue. It's no secret that between registration requirements and both official and unofficial harassment, the NGO community is struggling in Uzbekistan. These Samarkand-based activists demonstrate, however, that they can make a difference in the daily lives of everyday individuals. They focus their work on manageable problems, and do not attract official GOU attention. While the work is not splashy, it may well be the basis for the future of NGO activity in Uzbekistan. End comment.  
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